

A Day in the Life of Shadow Platoon

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As the dawn breaks over the limitless desert horizon, the subtle radiance reveals the familiar silhouette of U.S. HMMWVs moving intently down a stretch of rural highway. This image depicts the determined mission of the men of shadow platoon, ensuring the security of a critical 41 kilometer section of MSR Tampa (Highway 1) that provides the crucial link between Division boundaries. The impact of this meticulous patrol is as impressive as its variance of methods. It can be felt in the actions of CPL Scholfield and SPC Kealoua removing destroyed tire fragments from the road, or PFC Hilbensky on a mounted OP steadily scanning for suspicious activity through the focused lenses of the LRAS³, SPC Ripsam and PFC Jeadrik intensely searching vehicles for contraband at an established TCP, or PFC Duran moving the unfortunate remains of deceased animals which could be used to conceal lethal IEDs. After several hours the patrol withdraws from the highway, its encompassing efforts leave behind a safer sector for further allied patrols and encourage a rare sense of stabilization in a tumultuous land.

As the sun ascends high amidst the vast Iraqi sky, the heat begins to intensify to temperatures surpassing 100 degrees, but the morning's mission is not yet complete. The platoon continues past the gates of the FOB and embarks on a 30 minute detour to the village of Khanuga located in the outskirts of the sector. This follow-on operation is not tactically essential to the units' mission, but it promotes an enduring human connection, one that defines the basic altruistic nature of mankind. As the HMMWVs enter the stone boundaries of the village, clouds of dust spin into the air announcing the presence of American forces. Within seconds, children from all corners of the village begin sprinting after the patrol. As the platoon halts outside the house of the local sheik, the squad leader SSG Rojo dismounts and swiftly directs the position of each vehicle for optimum security. Upon dismounting themselves, the soldiers are immediately encircled by the curious children, most of whom having never seen Americans before. The language barrier is quickly overcome by the use of primitive hand signals and the occasional "mister, mister" to maintain the soldiers' attention. The circles of children suddenly turn into a small riot as team leaders, SGT Macinnes and SGT Bolden begin to open boxes filled with donated clothes, toys, candy and simple school supplies. As the children contend wildly for the bestowed gifts, soldiers such as SPC Harney and PV2 Squires ensure even the smaller children are not left out by hand delivering stuffed animals. Their efforts are rewarded with immense smiles and a permanent impression of gratitude.

The impact of shadow's generosity is reciprocated just as intently in the optimistic perspective of the Khanuga people. Despite the obvious poverty of the village and the accompanying infrastructure challenges, the sheik and local elders assert they have no significant issues and express an opinion of unwavering hope. They graciously offer tea and cold water as they ask questions of America and talk about their own families with beaming pride. After the conversations subside, the patrol departs the village, leaving behind a trail of waving children, and also taking away a powerful outlook of optimism in the face of the world's harsh realities. A positive experience such as this is too often lost in the flood of brutal images and graphic suffering capriciously strewn across the worldwide media, but in it quite possibly lies the key to the future of Iraq.